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CASE STUDY

Reconceiving the Congregation as a Source of Authenticity

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The Changing Status of the Congregation

The congregation remains the axis of collective identity for most practising Christians. Yet its most obvious and predictable feature is that of decline, and those concerned with charting the secularization of modern Britain have generally referred to the shrinking size of local congregations as an index of changing cultural orientations towards institutional Christianity and all that it stands for. Indeed, claims that religion in Britain may be characterized by a tendency to 'believe' rather than 'belong' suggest we need to look beyond the traditional congregation, and instead to dispersed networks, spiritual outlets and religion on the level of the individual. The centre of gravity has shifted, and with it the dominant orientation to religion, from a form of social engagement focused on commitment to a bounded community, to a form of consumption, focused on individual needs which may change over time. According to this analysis, the congregation is at best a social relic, gradually but inevitably disappearing from the cultural landscape. To be sure, a faithful few continue to follow a traditional model, which conceives the parish church as the focus for the spiritual identity of the local community, and the priest as father, intercessor, moral advisor, and guardian of local civic interests. As Tim Jenkins' insightful study of the country church in Comberton, Cambridgeshire demonstrates, this may now equate to a past ideal rather than a present reality. But if this is so, the ideal has not entirely evaporated.¹ For many British people, however – especially in urban and suburban areas – churches are seen as marginal to public life, their pastoral functions in particular replaced by schools, the health service and friendship networks.

And yet, despite this, there appears to be room for a new sort of congregation which caters to the needs affirmed by individuals. If religion has become less about obligation and more about choice, there is no reason why congregational involvement should not be a part of that choice, and indeed, it appears to be so for many British people. Moreover, while falling levels of

regular church attendance invite arguments for secularization, this phenomenon can be alternatively theorized in terms of the problem of 'associational disconnection'.² This is the argument that in a modernizing society, fewer of its citizens tend to be formal, actively participating members of organizations. This is reflected in falling levels of membership among trade unions and political parties, and in levels of participation in leisure activities requiring individuals to gather together on a regular basis.³ On this understanding, church decline indicates not declining Christian belief as such, but a lack of trust or interest in institutions and forms of communal activity generally.

If this argument is to be believed, then the status of congregations becomes an interesting question indeed, a barometer of cultural change rather than the death-knell of Christian Britain. While traditional congregations gradually slip off the statistical scale, we need to consider whether more creative, dynamic forms of collective engagement are taking their place, perhaps offering a more culturally authentic option for the post-traditional, late-modern seeker. The weekly service and coffee morning give way to the cell, network, festival, and parachurch, often defined by participation rather than membership as such. Here I refer to what sociologist David Lyon calls 'deregulation',⁴ the notion that, in contemporary, late-modern society, religion has become less rigid, less constrained, and freer to occupy novel spaces and take on new forms. The Christian congregation has not been sidelined in favour of this more modish form of engagement; rather, it is being rethought and reconfigured in light of it. As Christianity itself has become more deregulated, so those who consider themselves to be within its boundaries – and perhaps, especially, those at its very margins – venture a rethinking of the nature of the congregation: its purpose, structure, remit, and social form as a manifestation of Christian fellowship in the contemporary world. This case study considers some of the different ways in which congregations have evolved in recent times as *loci* of authenticity, and reflects on the emerging implications for Christian identity.

The Congregation as a Source of Authenticity

In the post-war period, British congregations have emerged as sites of both continuity and innovation. The parish structure of the Church of England, for example, has ensured that the role of the church as a focus for local identity, while now more tenuous, is at least maintained through the architectural presence of parish churches and the nostalgic attachment to them felt by some parishioners. In recent years, an alternative model of the congregation has gained ascendancy, one often referred to as the 'gathered congregation'. According to this understanding, a church does not cater to those within its parish boundaries, but to those who consciously make an explicit and active commitment to the life of the congregation. This model has become most

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visibly applied in large city-centre churches which attract congregants from a wide geographical radius. These are often evangelical congregations that foster high expectations with respect to lay involvement in church life, and it is not unusual for members to extend their practical commitment well beyond Sunday services. When this model of church life prevails, the congregation becomes the centre of a complex network of activities that has its own discourse and rules of engagement. Perhaps more importantly, these churches offer a supportive and extensive community of like-minded associates, a context for the transmission of common values, and opportunities for authority and empowerment consonant with one's own organizational, pastoral or pedagogical skills. Organizational structure is also matched by a concern for moral order, which partly explains an appeal to young families in a culture in which models of ethical prescription are increasingly elusive and unfashionable. Congregations like this are not restricted to the evangelical wing of the church, although they are arguably typical of it. The strong relationships between church and people that pertain in some Roman Catholic congregations can follow a similar model, although an institutionalized reticence towards affirming lay leadership means such support networks may not always be as enduring or as practically effective. When they are, these are channels for the nurturing of a sense of authenticity grounded in leadership and service – Christian legitimacy affirmed on the basis of one's active contribution to the moral and spiritual life of the collective.

While evangelicals have demonstrated a degree of pragmatic entrepreneurialism, they rarely enjoy the social and financial capital required to establish a material presence in local communities that is entirely independent from existing church structures. The British cultural landscape lacks the all-important voluntarism of the USA and the associations of grass-roots empowerment that go with it (not to mention the abundance of land and comparatively low cost of real estate). This has implications for many of those on the margins of church culture, who seek to challenge traditional conceptions of the congregation. For example, many of the most innovative church projects caught within the Church of England's 'fresh expressions' initiative – aimed at fostering 'different ways of being church in a changing culture'⁵ – depend upon nearby parish churches for premises, leadership and funding. While sometimes akin in style and ambition to the Calvary-inspired 'new paradigm' churches of the USA – combining relaxed worship and informality with a zeal for mission and Biblicism⁶ – they rarely achieve comparable levels of membership or sustained momentum at the popular level.

However, such initiatives mark a continued attempt to rethink the congregation as a collective experience, one whose value is often measured by its cultural engagement. A pioneering exemplar here was Sheffield's Nine O'Clock Service (NOS), which until its collapse amid scandal in 1995 combined charismatic evangelicalism with a conviction that the church can only have meaning for young people when it embodies their own 'culture'. In

practice, this involved the use of contemporary dance music in multi-media services, a positive affirmation of the fashions of youth subculture, and the celebration of the Christian message both in nightclubs and using the stylized media popularized in those contexts. The material expression of a shared Christianity was further distinguished by a commitment to environmental ethics and social justice, and the mainstream church's detachment from contemporary culture was presented as indicative of its moribund future. Its appeal to a dispersed 'culture' was formally recognized by the Anglican Church, when NOS was acknowledged as the Church of England's first 'Extra Parochial Place'.

NOS was radical and inspirational to many, and while no groups have subsequently managed to emulate its attendance levels,⁷ numerous initiatives have embraced a similar openness to rethinking church and many have adopted its conviction that authenticity is grounded in the extent to which a church is in tune with contemporary culture. One example is 'moot', a so-called 'emerging church' which is attached to St Matthew's Church, Westminster.⁸ Moot focuses on fostering community in a variety of ways, including links with London-based artists, small group Bible study, and multi-media worship. In so doing, it combines elements of the large-scale gathered congregation with a commitment to enculturation, to the need to 'be real' if one is to be true to one's self and Christian at the same time. This builds on an evangelical tradition of separating faith from culture, only to fuse them again in a kind of postmodern take on identity, fostering a creative reconfiguration of Christian selfhood alongside a positive orientation to social engagement. Moreover, in its commitment to the artistic and cultural life of its immediate locality, moot reflects something of the more traditional parish understanding of congregational life. The emphasis here, though, is on recognizing cultural particularity and shaping congregational identity in response to it, rather than serving the community through a model of worship and pastoral care that is pre-defined and unchanging.

This approach to congregational life is not without its critics, among them the historian Edward Norman who as long ago as 1978 warned that the church was placing a misguided emphasis upon being 'relevant' at the expense of paying attention to 'eternal truths'.⁹ Concerns were also expressed from non-confessional quarters, with the sociologist Bryan Wilson voicing his misgivings about liturgical experimentation on the grounds that it signals a search for exciting experiences which indirectly detach conveyers of solemn meaning from their original and proper reference points.¹⁰ Common to both critics is an underlying assumption that authenticity is grounded in continuity of tradition, something implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – challenged by those spiritual entrepreneurs who wish to steer the congregation into new realms of possibility.

Informing this shift in perceptions is a sense, as Philip Richter puts it, that 'denominational labels have become less significant to churchgoers than

shared Christian (counter-cultural) identity'.¹¹ With congregations to some extent catering to a generic Christian identity the question arises as to how this identity is defined and how it is made manifest in the life of local churches and chapels. We might also ask whether the quest to be 'authentically Christian' has become a more pressing concern for those who see their identities as under threat from a secularizing society, one response being to accentuate difference between themselves and British culture, or between themselves and the 'inauthentic', 'lukewarm' Christianity of the 'mainstream'. One striking example would be the Church of England's Reform group – originally established in opposition to women's ordination but remaining a traditionalist voice on a wide range of issues. Reform enjoys some success as a network-based lobbying group, and its voice was heard in the protest against the appointment of Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading when several affluent parishes threatened to withhold their diocesan contribution on account of his living in a homosexual relationship. For wealthy evangelical congregations, social class has been rediscovered as a source of spiritual capital, a commodity for deployment in the negotiation of theological conflict and in the defence of the boundaries of tradition.

In a different kind of critique of the mainstream church, charismatic Christians ground their spirituality in a thirst for the Holy Spirit that reflects a negative judgement of non-charismatics as staid, emotionally detached and resistant to the living Word. Here, authenticity is associated with embracing a mode of experience that feeds into both the subjective and the performative, both private and public manifestations of an embodied, living Christian vitality. Churches embracing this have allowed the charismatic to infuse congregational culture. This is perhaps most pronounced in the Pentecostal denominations and independent 'new churches', although a notable experientialism is also common in Anglican and Roman Catholic congregations within the charismatic renewal movement. A focus on shared, impassioned sung worship generates a culture of emotional expression that is rarely achieved in such intense forms in individual or small group contexts. Moreover, such an experiential dimension to congregational life accounts for the appeal of some churches, so that we might speak of what anthropologist Simon Coleman calls 'conference people', i.e. those individuals who attend a particular church in order to satisfy their need for a momentary spiritual experience, usually fostered within the emotional intensity of charismatic worship.¹² Coleman finds this tendency among charismatic Christians in Sweden, and it would not be unreasonable to apply this insight in accounting for the appeal of some of the unusually popular UK churches such as Kensington Temple or Holy Trinity Brompton.

Although there has recently been evidence of a tempering of the charismatic movement,¹³ perhaps as a counter-reaction to the signs and wonders theology of the 'third-wave' associated with John Wimber and the Toronto Blessing, it is undeniable that a steady shift has occurred over the past 50

years which indicates a growing interest in the mass Christian gathering – the community as a site for experience, rather than as established spiritual home. Some ‘conference people’ are content to derive such encounters from their regular church while others look elsewhere. The apparently significant number of people worshipping in British cathedrals, for example, may indicate a related preference for the large-scale and magisterial over the routine and provincial.¹⁴ More obvious and more thoroughly researched phenomena, however, are the popular Christian festivals such as Spring Harvest, New Wine or Greenbelt. Such mass contexts of Christian enthusiasm carry important consequences for the traditional congregation, particularly as they are arguably better suited to respond to the changing needs of the spiritual consumer. Spring Harvest, for example, is the largest British annual Bible week, now attracting some 80,000 participants each year. Both worship and teaching are major elements of the festival, but are predominantly organized within alternative seminar streams. Individuals choose between different streams, hence building up a ‘package’ of sessions that best suits their interests and predilections. Rob Warner has recently argued that this produces a paradoxical situation, with Spring Harvest presenting itself as unified in its conformity to established evangelical doctrines, while accidentally relativizing these claims by fostering a diverse range of speakers and sessions. Moreover, these seminars also change over time as their conveners seek to retain their contemporaneity and, in turn, their popularity among a shifting evangelical market.¹⁵ Warner’s analysis reminds us that, bound up in the issue of mass gatherings is not just a Durkheimian notion of the intensification of collective experience, but also the pervasive influence of late-capitalist consumerism, which reconfigures the relationship between individual Christians and the institutions they draw from in resourcing their faith. The general constituency of these festivals may also reflect how evangelical Protestants continue to sit more comfortably with the entrepreneurial ethos of late capitalism than their Roman Catholic cousins. In this sense, while denominational factors appear to play a lesser part than they used to in informing how Christians consciously construct their identities, they continue to exert some influence over the shape of the religious market.

Most pertinent for an understanding of the congregation is the question of whether such experiences fostered in these contexts become priorities over and above any continued commitment to a congregational or parish community. In some wings of the charismatic movement, for example, does the congregation risk becoming a source of heightened experience alone, one which is personally satisfying, but which is not part of a more comprehensive commitment to church life? Of course, those using such large churches as ‘occasional congregations’ may regularly attend another church, and pledge a more enduring and practical commitment to it (indeed, their evangelical appeal may imply that this is likely). If so, then at the very least, we need to be open to the notion that congregations have acquired multiple functions,

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and in response to a fickle and itinerant pool of participants, some churches may find themselves serving a niche market, with some offering 'experience' while others serve the parish. One analysis might associate the former with middle-class, 'elective parochials', that increasing population of Britons who move relatively frequently between jobs and homes and who, upon arriving in their latest sojourn, seek out temporary experiences of community. Those sympathetic to the church naturally gravitate towards 'gathered' congregations because they are more receptive to them, their commitment based on choice and immediate need rather than a durable attachment to the locality. The dominance of the middle classes within charismatic evangelical churches makes this link even more likely. Alternatively, the 'occasional' or 'temporary' congregation may be viewed as one more step on the way to what Alan Jamieson has called a 'churchless faith',¹⁶ a more palatable possibility once the congregation has been reduced to an optional source of individualized spiritual experience.

Yet even this is not necessarily discontinuous with congregational involvement. Disillusionment with the church as an institution and body of ideas may lead not to wholesale disaffiliation, but to a change in personal orientation, so that the congregation is treated as a resource, presenting various experiences and ideas which may be adopted, negotiated or rejected in light of what is felt to be authentic by the discerning individual seeker. Such a trend was found by Andrew Yip in a study of gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians, surveyed during the late 1990s. While frequently labelled as having a 'problematic sexuality' out of keeping with Christian teaching, Yip's respondents more often than not remained affiliated to the mainstream churches.¹⁷ Here the congregation becomes a cultural resource, to borrow James Beckford's expression,¹⁸ and something from which one may selectively draw and borrow in accordance with individual needs and identity politics. Those who feel marginalized by, or alienated from, the mainstream church may find this orientation to congregational involvement particularly attractive, especially if no alternative community options present themselves, or if personal commitment prevents a complete detachment from the institution. One suspects, for example, that many female Roman Catholics and liberalized evangelicals have adopted such an approach to their congregational commitment for some time, feeling some discomfort with the party line, but also harbouring a reluctance to sever links with the mother church that has embodied their faith, perhaps since birth. With individualization apparently outpacing institutional change among the churches, we might expect this orientation to congregational engagement to become more dominant in future years.

Community Beyond the Congregation

While many have revised their expectations of the congregation, others have sought Christian community elsewhere. Perhaps most obviously, the cell church movement has reconceived the nature of Christian fellowship as a small-scale, intimate gathering. Such a vision has a long history, not least in the early Methodist tradition of ‘class meetings’, which were neither an alternative nor a supplement to regular Sunday worship, but ‘an integral structural part of the Methodist Society’.¹⁹ Yet the modern cell church – inspired by evangelical writers such as Ralph Neighbour and Lawrence Singlehurst – represents a new twist on this theme. Church is reconceived as the small group or ‘cell’, a model that emphasizes church as close-knit and cohesive, but also united in a common focus on saving souls; warmth and mutual sharing are at its heart, but relationships are temporary in so far as cells are eventually expected to multiply as part of a mission strategy. Such objectives are often organized around highly rationalized structures and a pyramid system of leadership.²⁰

The restorationist house churches – now restyled as ‘new churches’ – occupy in many respects the same stream of development, elevating authority by the spirit and lay activism alongside a strong ethic of internal conformity and obedience. The emerging place of ‘small groups’ as a low-key, more intimate alternative to a more traditional ‘congregational’ gathering has gained momentum through the church growth movement, with ‘small groups’ often hailed as ‘building blocks’ for a healthy and growing Christian community.²¹ Outside the evangelical world, spiritual retreats, courses in Christian counselling and the ‘12-step’ courses which have emerged in response to Alpha, such as the more gradualist Emmaus, also make use of a small group format. This perhaps offers a surrogate for the close community felt to be lacking in fast-paced consumer society, while also often feeding off secular cultural trends, such as the systematization of consumer experience, emerging concerns about which are captured in talk of the ‘McDonaldization’ of the church. While a search for authenticity draws on personal experience, it often achieves its goal within communal contexts, which offer an interactive medium through which meaning is constructed and sustained over time.

While the cell church embodies a shift to the small-scale, close-knit and intimate, the parachurch movement signals the rising significance of organizations like World Vision or the Evangelical Alliance which function on a national or transnational level, alongside congregations. It is difficult to gauge the precise significance of parachurch organizations for the British context. The appeal of parachurches among committed churchgoers suggests they are not treated as a surrogate for regular congregational commitment, and yet some organizations appear to foster an enthusiasm for international mission which relegates church to the status of a secondary concern. This is

the case, for example, with Morris Cerullo World Evangelism, which attracted thousands among the UK's black churches to its Mission to London revivals during the early 1990s. Large-scale revival meetings centred on a health and wealth 'faith' message, with corresponding signs and wonders, but the teaching embraced by participants also focused on "'winning people for Jesus" . . . as part of an international effort'.²² As such, parachurches offer an alternative context for Christian activism, one that fosters a space in which ordinary Christians may contribute to mission or social action on an international stage. Its appeal beyond the local and national reflects both globalized perspectives and a passion for 'world mission', particularly important to evangelicals and Pentecostals, but also among those who combine their Christian identity with a commitment to humanitarian causes. Hence, while it is true that the influence of the parachurch phenomenon is more tangible within the context of global missionary efforts than within local congregations, the latter are increasingly exposed to their allure as meta-level media for the expression of Christian identity in a globalizing world.

Finally, advances in technology have forced us to rethink the very nature of community itself. Stewart Hoover, in his *Mass Media Religion*,²³ charted the impact of the mass media on US churches, demonstrating that the diffuse audiences of televangelism reflect an experience of 'translocalism'. This sense of being a part of a wider community was fostered by a kind of vicarious religion based on television viewing behaviour; viewers feel a part of a united televised church, while remaining passive participants within their own living rooms. The World Wide Web demands we rethink the issue further, with Manuel Castells even postulating a global 'network society', unbridled by local constraints and less subject to the limitations of the nation state.²⁴ Religion has its place in the information age, as does the congregation, but in radically reconfigured reconceptualized forms. An excellent example of this reorientation is the 'Vurch' ('Virtual Church') website, which offers the opportunity for prayer to be typed in and submitted to 'God's private address' (available to no other user), or to 'God's public one' which allows other 'Vurchgoers to see it and put their hands together with you'.²⁵ In this radical overhaul of congregational reality, the church finds itself recognizing changing notions of privatized engagement, shifting authenticities in line with advanced technology, and producing an experience that is subversive, playful, exploratory and often chaotic. It opens up new possibilities in the conception of collective worship and community identity which challenge the congregation on every level.

Notes

1 Timothy Jenkins, 1999, *Religion in English Everyday Life*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 43–73.

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- 2 Martyn Percy, 2004, 'Losing Our Space, Finding Our Place? The Changing Identity of the English Parish Church', in S. Coleman and P. Collins (eds), *Religion, Identity and Change: Perspectives on Global Transformations*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 26–41, at p. 28.
- 3 Grace Davie, 'From Obligation to Consumption: A Framework for Reflection in Northern Europe', *Political Theology*, 6(3) (2005), 281–301, p. 283.
- 4 David Lyon, 2000, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Cambridge: Polity.
- 5 Fresh Expressions website – <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/section.asp?id=24> – accessed 20.03.06.
- 6 See Donald E. Miller, 1997, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 7 At the height of its popularity, NOS attracted around 600 participants each week and boasted 400 members as early as 1988, only three years after it was first launched. See Roland Howard, 1996, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service*, London and New York: Mowbray, pp. 27f.
- 8 Moot website – <http://www.moot.uk.net/> – accessed 10.12.06
- 9 Simon Goodenough, 1983, *The Country Parson*, Newton Abbot, London and North Pomfret: David & Charles, p. 166.
- 10 Bryan Wilson, 1976, *The Contemporary Transformation of Religion*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 93ff.
- 11 Philip Richter, 2004 'Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies?', in M. Guest, K. Tusting and L. Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, Aldershot: Ashgate, pp. 169–84 at p. 169.
- 12 Simon Coleman, 2000, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 13 Brierley, *Tide is Running Out*, p. 54 discussing a decline of 16% in those self-defining as 'charismatic', with a shifting preference (growing by 68%) in those adopting the label 'mainstream evangelical'.
- 14 Stephen Platten, 2006, *Dreaming Spires?: Cathedrals in a New Age*, London: SPCK.
- 15 Rob Warner, (forthcoming), 'Autonomous Conformism: the Paradox of Entrepreneurial Protestantism (Spring Harvest: a case study)', in L. Woodhead and A. Day (eds), *Religion and the Individual*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- 16 Alan Jamieson, 2002, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches*, London: SPCK.
- 17 Andrew K. T. Yip, 2003, 'The Self as the Basis of Religious Faith: Spirituality of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Christians', in Davie, Heelas and Woodhead, *Predicting Religion*, pp. 135–46.
- 18 James A. Beckford, 1989, *Religion and Advanced Industrial Society*, London: Unwin Hyman.
- 19 Edward R. Wickham, 1957, *Church and People in an Industrial City*, London: Lutterworth Press, p. 268.
- 20 David Harvey, 'Cell Church: Its Situation in British Evangelical Culture', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 18(1) (2003), 95–109.
- 21 For example, in Christian Schwarz, 1996, *Natural Church Development*, Churchsmart Resources.
- 22 Nancy A. Schaefer, 2002, 'Morris Cerullo's London Revivals as "Glocal" (neo-) Pentecostal Movement Events', *Culture and Religion*, 3(1) (2002), p. 114.
- 23 Stewart Hoover, 1988, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Mass Media Church*, Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- 24 Manuel Castells, 1998, *The Information Age: Economy, Society And Culture*, Vol. III *End of Millennium*, Malden, Massachusetts and Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- 25 Vurch website – <http://www.vurch.com/1prayer.htm> – accessed 17.02.06.